THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF LAWRENCEVILLE
Lawrenceville, New Jersey

300th Anniversary Celebration
March 15, 1998

John M. Buchanan

Text: Matthew 19:16-26

What an honor to be the preacher for a 300th birthday party. That just doesn't happen very often. In my neck of the woods there may have been an occasional French fur trapper who found his way to the big lake at the end of the river 200 or 250 years ago...but he was probably running for his life, didn't stick around very long and he certainly wasn't a Presbyterian New Church Development pastor.

So people from Chicago are very impressed with anything older than 150 years...and 300 is almost beyond our comprehension.

I'm glad to be here as well because of my enormous respect and affection for your pastor, Dana Fearon. Dana belongs to a group of pastors who get together twice a year to study, talk, share ideas and stand together in our ministry. Through those semi-annual meetings, I have come to look forward to seeing him, learning what's on his mind and being personally enriched by the professionalism and passion and integrity with which he practices this vocation of ours.

I have noticed that these meetings are always held in proximity to a fine golf course and that Dana's energy and attention and passion seems to gradually increase during the meeting as we approach tee time on the last day.

When he invited me to be here today I was still Moderator of the General Assembly and overwhelmed with travel schedules and commitments. I told him I thought I better stay home in Chicago for awhile after my term was up. My fear, of course – which turned out to be well-founded – was that Fourth Presbyterian Church would discover that it could do very well without me. What I told Dana, however, was that I thought my people might want me to stay home awhile.

His answer was classic. "Tell your congregation that I know it is a hardship for them to relinquish you for yet another Sunday. Tell them also that we are their grandparents, and sometimes you have to go home again to wish the grandparents well so more wonderful children will come forth."

So, here I am – privileged to thank you for the faithfulness of your past and your present: for all the wonderful ways you reflect the best of our Presbyterian tradition. For your wonderful new Capital Funds effort and the renewal it will enable and the mission it will support. In this interesting time when some think we should forget about our long and distinguished history and

sacrifice our precious unity in the name of ideology, I'm grateful for your being here – your eloquent reminder of who we are and who we need to be in the future.

I also take it to be part of my responsibility to remind you that birthday parties are for enjoying our past, looking back for awhile, but very briefly – and then looking ahead.

That the future – the next chapter in the life of this wonderful congregation is the agenda for you today.

* * *

Then someone came to him and said, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The young man said to him, "I have kept all these; what do I still lack?" Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, I is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, "Then who can be saved?" But Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible."

* * *

The great philosopher, Immanuel Kant, said that there are three questions in life:

> "What can we know?
> What must we do?
> What can we hope for?"

This is a sermon about the second question. What must we do?

Walter Wink, put it even more powerfully. Wink says:

> "The fundamental question for the first half of our pilgrimage is 'What is the meaning of my life?' The question for the second half is, 'With the time I have left, how can I make a difference?'"

Life's second question –

"What must we do?
"With the time I have left, how can I make a
difference?"

Sometimes life puts that question to us urgently. Arthur Ashe, who died in February, five years ago, was a world champion tennis player, captain of America's Davis Cup Tem, who in the course of open heart surgery, contracted AIDS from a blood transfusion. As he was dying, he wrote a wonderful book, *Days of Grace*.

After his first by-pass surgery and the decision to retire from playing tennis in 1979, before he contracted AIDS, Ashe experienced a sense of uneasiness, restlessness. He reflects:

> "How could I be dissatisfied, even subtly, with my life to that point? I had lived a fantasy of a life. But I was dissatisfied. Who knows what force gnaws at us, telling us that our accomplishments, no matter how sensational, are not enough, that we need to do more?" [p. 39]
>
> "I wanted to make a difference, however small in the world." [p. 43]

Life's second question. Immanuel Kant, speaking out of the dim past, and Walter Wink from a modern classroom, and Arthur Ashe, in the middle of an unplanned, unexpected collision with his own mortality: don't they all sound like that young man who one day came to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" He'd obviously been thinking about it a lot, too.

This is a very attractive young person. He was so earnest, so sincere, so hard working, so purposeful, so successful. He sounds like he'd be right at home at Fourth Church or here.

What must I do to inherit eternal life? Life's second big question. His theology is not very reformed. We sons and daughters of John Calvin know that you can't do anything to inherit eternal life. All you can do is receive your inheritance. Nevertheless, we understand what he means. There's something gnawing at this young person, and who doesn't know what it feels like? She's got it all: great job, good friends, lots of travel, promising future and a growing portfolio with her broker...but there is this gnawing disease...this middle of the night dissatisfaction. What more must I do?

Jesus doesn't condemn or criticize the young man. He appreciates him. When he tells the young man to follow the religious rules, to keep on keeping on, and the young man assures him that he's already doing all that, Jesus prescribes: tells him something further to do...and it's stunning.

"Sell your possessions – give the money
to the poor. Come – follow me."

One scholar, commenting on the text, said that if you aren't appalled by this message, you have not yet heard it.

The young man, Matthew explains, went away grieving because he had many possessions. He was appalled. I can understand that. I'm appalled too. Who isn't? Sell everything? Give it all away?

And then Jesus tells a little story about a camel that obviously can't squeeze through the eye of a needle and observes that it would actually be easier for a wealthy person to get into the kingdom. And I don't know about you, but that doesn't make me feel any better about my prospects or yours.

I think one of the most charming and reassuring discoveries in New Testament scholarship is the unusual abundance of erasures, and additions and deletions and changes in this paragraph in the most ancient manuscripts. Christians have been trying to change this story for a thousand years.

My favorite, and the most popular effort comes from the ninth century. It seems that a scribe decided that there must have been a small opening in city walls, called the "Eye of the Needle," by which late arrivals, after the gates were closed for the night, could gain admittance. The idea was that the camel would have to get down on its knees and be relieved of its burden of goods in order to get in. It's too bad there's nothing to that. Think of what a great stewardship sermon that could become in the hands of a good preacher. Heavily loaded Christians, needing to downsize, unload some of their goods – as in a pledge to the church – in order to squeeze into the kingdom.

A stewardship chairperson in a former church – who is a good friend – used to say: "John, if you could just find a way to say 'double your pledges and I'll get you into heaven,' I'll bet we'd make our budget."

But you can't say that. It's not what he meant. Jesus was using hyperbole. It is impossible for a camel to squeeze itself through the eye of a needle. It's impossible to buy your way into the kingdom. It's impossible to buy meaningful life.

And that's the point. That's the sad point of this whole incident. The young man couldn't do what he needed to do. He thought he couldn't sell everything because he had a lot, and he loved what he had. So he went away, sad, grieving, resigned.

You and I live in a culture that promises us, and our children, that you can buy life. You can establish happiness and security if you earn enough, have enough, accumulate enough. We live in a "consumer culture." Ads in *The New Yorker* or *Sun Times Magazine* define the good life and you have to have money, lots of it, to get a piece of it.

The trouble is consumer culture doesn't deliver on its promises to provide happiness, and in fact, works to the detriment of institutions which can – family, schools, non-profit public organizations and churches, mosques, synagogues. Cornell West whose fine book, *Race*

Matters, looks evenly and intelligently at the malaise of racism, poverty, unemployment and escalating violence in which we find ourselves, and in a recent interview said that when a market economy – which we now know is in some way necessary – becomes a market culture – mediating institutions that hold us together start to deteriorate. And why not? Why wouldn't family, school and church deteriorate if the philosophic, spiritual drive behind the culture is greed, selfishness, narcissism?

Jesus did not condemn this young man. He had a wonderful opportunity to launch a diatribe against success and its rewards but he didn't. He did not condemn his wealth. In fact, he apparently had other friends of means: Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea. He loved this young man.

What's wrong with him? Well, he's not free, for starters. He was already in bondage. His inability to sell all means that what he had – owned him. I'll bet he was too busy to enjoy life. I'll bet he worked so hard to get ahead, he couldn't remember what "ahead" meant. I'll bet the task of securing what he had, scurrying to keep up with inflation, was so important that he had no time, no love, no passion in life.

I think that's why he came to Jesus. He was engaged in a struggle for his own soul. And for him the prescription was surgical: let it go – give it away – and come follow me. Those are marching orders for the church, too, I believe.

One of the things I learned last year was how faithfully our church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), has served its Lord in mission, and when it did, how very effective it has been and is. It is a story for which I am deeply grateful and deeply proud.

One of the most amazing and successful missionary endeavors in the history of Christianity is the story of the Presbyterian Church in Korea. Presbyterian presence in Korea today is huge. There are large Presbyterian churches in every city and village. Some of the biggest churches in Seoul have 30,000, 40,000, 50,000 members. There are wonderful Presbyterian universities, hospitals, secondary schools and welfare agencies. Every Presbyterian church in Korea has on its steeple a red neon cross, and at night, approaching a city or looking out a hotel window, one sees many red crosses in the night sky, an affirmation of the presence of the church and the gospel.

It began in 1884, when two missionaries, a Methodist and his wife, and a Presbyterian doctor by the name of Alan Underwood, arrived from Tokyo. Korean Methodists and Presbyterians argue about who arrived first. The Methodists claim that since Underwood was a Presbyterian and thus a gentleman, he must have deferred to the Methodist missionary's wife and allowed her to get off the boat first. Presbyterians remind the Methodists that their man was called back to Tokyo, so Underwood, who walked all the way to Seoul, was the first Protestant.

When Presbyterians visit Korea, they always ask, "How did it happen? Why is Christianity so successful here? What are you doing that we aren't doing?" We asked those questions to Dong Ik Kim, pastor of the oldest Presbyterian Church, Underwood's church, Sae-Moon-An, and he

told us that there were four periods of dramatic growth, each with a particular story – each characterized by Christian people and church risking – giving its life in order to follow.

Soon after Underwood arrived, Severance Presbyterian Hospital was founded and began delivering western health care in Seoul. And then, in 1890 there was an enormous cholera epidemic. Fifty thousand Koreans died, many of them simply abandoned in the streets because of the absence of health care facilities. Christians, Presbyterian members of that congregation, Sae-Moon-An Church, went into the streets and picked up the sick and dying and took them to the hospital or ministered to them. And the government wondered and inquired, "Who are these people who care for the dying? Why do they do this?" The government, in the midst of the 1890 cholera epidemic, began referring to Christians as "angels" and the church began to grow.

In 1910 the Japanese invaded and occupied Korea and the Presbyterian Church was involved in a huge public protest. Later, when the Japanese ruled that all public meetings, including Christian worship, must begin with a Shinto ceremony, Presbyterian pastors were imprisoned and executed for refusing; the church added 200,000 members.

In 1950 when the armies of the north invaded and the church provided social services and food and shelter, its membership doubled again. (Our church – one of the few ways Korean people in the North and South stay in touch through the total isolation for almost fifty years.)

And in 1980 in the midst of a military dictatorship when the church once again stood with the people and Presbyterian leaders were publicly reprimanded and imprisoned, the church grew rapidly.

There is, apparently, a connection between the greatness of the Presbyterian Church in Korea and its willingness to serve its country, its people, with courage and determination to risk its security and affluence and life. We witnessed the same dynamic in Croatia, Cuba, Brazil, Argentina, Chile.

The most reassuring part of the text is that the disciples themselves were amazed and asked, "Then who can be saved?" They weren't wealthy obviously. They had given up about as much as it is possible to give and yet they knew that they still loved what they had.

Arthur Ashe wrote,

> "I'm glad I have enough money to live comfortably. I decided long ago that, on the whole, I much prefer having money to not having it. On the other hand, I also learned a long time ago what money can and cannot do for me. From what we get we make a living. What we give, however, makes a life." [p. 176]

The young man's ultimate salvation was in God's hands. But his life, his future, was his ability to give – to open his hands and let go of his possessions – to answer life's second question about making a difference by giving to a cause, a hope, a Lord. The young man's tragedy was that confronted by Jesus Christ, he could not, would not respond.

I found Arthur Ashe's memoir touching because he experienced and wrote about, in a compressed period of months, the human condition. Most of us, thank God, don't have that necessity. And yet, we are not here forever. We have only so many chances to make a difference.

When Arthur Ashe, following his second open heart operation was told that he was infected with the HIV virus from a blood transfusion – that he would get AIDS – and that he was going to die, he became angry, depressed; and then, after three weeks his anger began to subside and he started the process of rethinking his life.

> "You come to the realization that time is short. These are extraordinary conditions. You have to step up. How much time I had left, I did not know. However, I could not ignore the fact that AIDS, as well as heart disease, was exacting a heavy toll on my body. I had no time to waste."

So he began to speak out on the topic of AIDS: how you get it, how to keep from getting it – and how urgent it is for all of us to understand the terrifying prospect of this epidemic continuing unabated indirectly aided by the attitude of much of the religious community which finds itself opposed to the use of the most effective means of prevention, incredibly, still opposing and preventing our youngsters from receiving even information that can and does save their lives – in the name of the ethic of Jesus.

Arthur Ashe opened his heart and his resources and established a Foundation for the Defeat of AIDS, and an association for African-American Athletes, and an Institute for Urban Health at the State University of New York, and a chair in Pediatric AIDS Research at St. Jude's Hospital, Memphis; he became more vocal and active politically.

And he wrote:

> "As I settled into this new stage of my life I became increasingly conscious of … an exhilaration. I felt pain, but also something like pleasure in responding purposefully, vigorously. I had lost many matches on the tennis court, but I had seldom quit. I was losing, but playing well now: my head was down, my eyes riveted on the ball, I had to be careful but I could not be tentative." [p. 251]

And it seemed to me, reading this graceful book and thinking about what it means to be alive and well, with an opportunity to make a difference, it seemed to me that Arthur Ashe had in fact, discovered his answer to life's second question and that you and I and maybe even the whole Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) might pay careful attention.

At the end of the book, not very long before he died, he wrote,

> "I am a fortunate man. Aside from AIDS and heart disease, I have no problems." [p. 292]

Your predecessors – all the way back to those hearty souls who established this church 300 years ago, and built and rebuilt it here over three centuries, answered the call of Jesus Christ to risk, to commit, to follow.

In your time you have responded by giving your love, your energy and imagination and your resources.

And now, your fourth century – think of that…one hundred years from now people will be doing it again: the picture will be clearer but the dates, in floral grandeur, will be there: 1698 - 2098…because – if – you now, in this important year hear his call and open your hands and follow.

Your salvation and mine, is in the hands of a faithful savior. Your ultimate destiny is in the gracious hands of a loving god.

Your life … your capacity to make a difference, to love and work and care … to participate in and to empower, and to support institutions that bring healing and hope to others – your fulfillment and purpose and even your happiness, all of that is in your hands.

Life's second question … "What must I do?"

* * *

For all that has gone before – for saints who have preceded us, for faithful ministers and people and for your gentle guiding providence, O God, we give you thanks.

Eternal God, we would be faithful. Help us; strengthen and encourage us, and assure that as we open our hands and give, we do your will, your work, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.